

Dominic Stewart

SOUNDING ENGLISH

Standard British English Pronunciation
for Italian Learners



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Dominic Stewart, *Sounding English*
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INTRODUCTION

In this book you will study primarily the accent known as Received Pronunciation, usually abbreviated to RP. It is a British accent sometimes called “teacher’s English” or even “dictionary English”, and in fact it is the accent adopted in the phonetic transcriptions and audio clips found in British dictionaries. RP is a sociolect, that is, a social accent rather than a regional one, though phonetically it has more in common with the accents of south-east England than anywhere else. It tends to be associated, albeit simplistically, with people such as doctors, politicians, teachers, lawyers and actors. Incidentally, in case you’re wondering why this accent bears such a curious name, it is because “received” is to be intended with the meaning it carries in collocations such as *received wisdom* and *received opinion*, i.e., “accepted”.

It has been argued that the phonetic symbols adopted by dictionaries to represent RP are beginning to show their age. For example, the use of /əʊ/ (the vowel of *boat*) to represent the vowel in words such as *role* and *goal* is challengeable, because nowadays almost all RP speakers pronounce them as something like /rɒʊl/ and /gɒʊl/. However, since in this book I advocate the use of certain monolingual English dictionaries as a guide to RP pronunciation, it would be disorienting to adopt phonetic symbols different from those that appear in the dictionaries recommended. Therefore, in the chapters that follow you will find, for instance, /rəʊl/ and /gəʊl/ rather than /rɒʊl/ and /gɒʊl/.

As the title of this book suggests, the focus is very much on RP, but where relevant there will be brief comparisons with regional British accents and with General American pronunciation.

Before we begin, some observations are necessary on the approach adopted in this work:

- you will be struck by the advertently non-technical nature of this book, which arises from courses taught to Italian university students within the range B1 to C1. The intention is to provide Italian students with something fairly light that will help to eradicate typical defects of pronunciation acquired during their school years. For this reason, I tend to avoid descriptions of the type “/ʒ/ is a voiced, palatal, fricative consonant”, providing instead indications of the type of words in which this consonant is likely to be found, and encouraging students to listen to audio clips in dictionaries if they are uncertain about precisely which sound the symbol in question represents. I also stay away from more complex issues, such as the difference between phonetics and phonemics
- a further important point is that this book is conceived primarily as a reference work rather than a coursebook. During my university teaching course, I use the explanations in this work as a reference, but naturally the course itself is interspersed with clips, interviews and web resources in order to furnish examples of the sounds analysed
- many English-language textbooks are designed with an international readership in mind, but this book targets Italian learners of English. This means that considerable attention is devoted (i) to sounds which are hard to produce for Italian speakers, and (ii) to instances where the spelling of a word can trigger errors of pronunciation – it is no secret that English spelling can be a poor guide to how words are pronounced.

UNIT 1: WORD STRESS (1)

With reference to Italian, you can sometimes hear debates – both serious and light-hearted – concerning the stress placement in certain words, for example should the pronunciation of *rubrica* be *rubrica*, with stress on the first syllable, or *rubrica*, with stress on the second syllable? Regional differences play a role here, but both *rubrica* and *rubrica* are easily understood by Italians. Imagine, however, a non-Italian who misplaces the stress of, for example, *angelo*, *vangelo* and *fegato*, mispronouncing them as *angelo*, *vangelo* and *fegato* rather than the correct *angelo*, *vangelo* and *fegato*: such mispronunciations are so wrong that they risk being incomprehensible.

The same applies to English: for example, *category* and *adjective* are both stressed on the first syllable (*category*, *adjective*), but if you stress the second syllable instead of the first, that is *category*, *adjective*, then you may not be understood by English speakers. Word stress is crucial, particularly in a language such as English, whose orthography provides no graphic indications of how a word is stressed.

Note that many words have both primary stress (the main stress of the word) and secondary stress. The distinction between primary and secondary stress is relevant for polysyllabic words, for example *opportunistic* has a secondary stress on the first syllable, whereas the primary stress is on the fourth syllable: *opportunistic*. In this work the emphasis will be on primary stress.

WORD STRESS INDICATORS IN DICTIONARIES

Let's begin with an obvious remark: if a word is monosyllabic (for example *win*, *light*, *closed*) then it does not have a stress indica-

tor in the dictionary. Stress indicators are used only for words with more than one syllable.

The usual way of indicating stress in dictionaries is by means of a high stress mark (like an apostrophe) before the stressed syllable within the phonetic transcription of the word in question. Note that phonetic transcription is placed within slash brackets, that is /.../. For example:

– on the first syllable:

satellite /'sætələɪt/

picnic /'pɪknɪk/

– on the last syllable:

control /kən'trəʊl/

violin /vaɪə'liːn/

– in mid-word position:

comparative /kəm'pærətɪv/

manipulate /mə'nɪpjəleɪt/

This method is adopted by almost all British monolingual dictionaries of English – which also provide audio clips for each word listed – and by most bilingual Italian-English dictionaries. You are advised, however, to use monolingual dictionaries to check for pronunciation, particularly learner's dictionaries such as the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* and the *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary*, all freely available online at the time of writing. Don't worry if you have difficulty reading the phonetic transcriptions provided above, you will learn the phonetic symbols of RP as you progress through the book.

For quick reference, however, you could refer to the appendix at the end of this book.

Note that what we are discussing here is normal stress patterns, but these may change if a more specific emphasis is required. For example, the words *thirteen*, *fourteen* etc. are usually stressed on the second syllable, but in specific circumstances – usually for reasons of emphasis – the stress may shift to the first syllable, for example “You didn't hear me – I said thirteen, not fourteen”.

Now it's over to you. Try to indicate where the stress falls in the following words. Initially you could do this intuitively, and then consult your monolingual dictionary, checking the stress in the transcriptions and/or the audio clips provided for each word.

WORD STRESS EXERCISE 1

For proper nouns, for example n. 23 and n. 38, see the note following the exercise.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. technique | 2. event |
| 3. capitalism | 4. develop |
| 5. inadequate | 6. comfortable |
| 7. percentage | 8. centimetre |
| 9. interesting | 10. variety / society / anxiety |
| 11. engine | 12. report |
| 13. category | 14. vinegar |
| 15. effort | 16. syringe |
| 17. police | 18. Catholic |
| 19. adjective | 20. component |
| 21. ignorance | 22. machine |
| 23. Ian | 24. accompany |
| 25. afternoon | 26. Milan |
| 27. lunatic | 28. July |
| 29. essay (<i>as a noun</i>) | 30. character |
| 31. absurd | 32. origin |
| 33. result | 34. calendar |
| 35. hemisphere / atmosphere | 36. talented |
| 37. balloon | 38. Marilyn Monroe |
| 39. advertise | 40. image |
| 41. Andrea | 42. Nicola |
| 43. narrator | 44. influence(r) |
| 45. perseverance | 46. Halloween |
| 47. inspire, perspire | 48. empire, vampire |
| 49. e-mail | 50. Macbeth |

Notes on Word Stress Exercise 1

- you will have noticed that there are some proper nouns in the exercise, whether names of people, places or cultural events. You can generally find these in at least one of the learner's dictionaries recommended above
- in my experience, of all the words in the exercise, Italian students of English most often mistake the stress of *event*, *percentage*, *centimetre*, *category*, *adjective* and *component*
- words with the suffix *-ism* are not stressed on the suffix but earlier in the word (*capitalism*, *plagiarism*, *tokenism*, *imperialism*, *absenteeism*)
- the noun *ignorance* is stressed on the first syllable, but the verb (*ignore*) is stressed on the second. This is anomalous because nouns ending with the suffixes *-ance* and *-ence* generally show the same stress as the related verb (if there is one), for example: *accept/acceptance*, *insure/insurance*, *resist/resistance*, *insist/insistence*
- *Andrea* and *Nicola*, both stressed on the first syllable, are predominantly female names in English
- many English words have entered Italian but have undergone a shift of stress. In the above exercise, *report*, *influencer*, *Halloween*, *e-mail* and *Macbeth*, are usually pronounced in Italian as *report*, *influencer*, *Halloween*, *e-mail* and *Macbeth*. Not long ago the English noun *perseverance* was adopted as the name of a rover designed to explore the planet Mars, but in Italian news reports the pronunciation was almost always *perseverance*. Many other words could be added to this list, such as *turnover*, *background*, *cheeseburger*, *teenager*, which in Italian are often pronounced *turnover*, *background*, *cheeseburger*, *teenager*.

By now you will have understood that the words listed in the above exercise have been selected because their stress is far from obvious to Italian speakers. By contrast, words such as *appointment*, *formulation* and *anthropology* have much more transparent stress be-

cause the respective suffixes *-ment*, *-ation* and *-ology* are for the most part associated with predictable stress patterns. Therefore, even if in a written text you come across certain words with which you are unfamiliar, you will probably be able to work out the stress if they have suffixes such as the above, e.g., *department*, *avocation*, *dendrology*.

We will return to word stress in Unit 3.

UNIT 2: SCHWA /ə/

The schwa, represented by the symbol /ə/, is by far the most common phonetic vowel in English. To get an idea of what it sounds like, listen to the words below using the audio clips in your dictionaries. The schwa occurs in all sorts of words, and it may be fixed or variable.

FIXED SCHWAS

Fixed schwas are always pronounced, and are therefore always present in the phonetic transcription provided by dictionaries:

<i>about</i> /ə'baʊt/	<i>alert</i> /ə'lɜ:t/	<i>perhaps</i> /pə'hæps/
<i>harbour</i> /'hɑ:bə/	<i>compass</i> /'kʌmpəs/	<i>Christopher</i> /'krɪstəfə/
<i>banana</i> /bə'nɑ:nə/	<i>Madonna</i> /mə'dɒnə/	<i>assessment</i> /ə'sesmənt/

VARIABLE SCHWAS

Variable schwas may or may not be present in the pronunciation. It often depends upon how quickly the word in question is pronounced. For example, mid-word schwa recurrently disappears in spontaneous speech, e.g.:

<i>desperate</i> /'desp(ə)rət/	<i>reasonable</i> /'ri:z(ə)nəbəl/	<i>restaurant</i> /'rest(ə)rɒnt/
<i>average</i> /'æv(ə)rɪdʒ/	<i>Barbara</i> /'bɑ:b(ə)rə/	<i>marvellous</i> /'mɑ:v(ə)ləs/
<i>national</i> /'næʃ(ə)nəl/	<i>Canberra</i> /'kænb(ə)rə/	<i>chocolate</i> /'tʃɒk(ə)lət/

There is some variation in the way dictionaries deal with these cases. Some dictionaries place this “disappearing schwa” in brackets (as above), some dictionaries use a superscript, for example /'ri:zⁿəbəl/, some dictionaries eliminate the schwa completely,

for instance /'næʃnəl/, while others even consider the schwa to be fixed, i.e., /'næʃənəl/.

Unstressed mid-word /ɪ/ is sometimes reduced to schwa, for example in the word *centimetre*, but frequently dictionaries do not agree about how such words should be transcribed. For example, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* consider the second vowel of the word *centimetre* to be /ɪ/, i.e., /'sentɪmi:tə/, but the *Collins Online Dictionary* considers the second vowel to be /ə/, so /'sentəmi:tə/. Compare *audible* and *recipe*.

WEAK FORMS: VARIABLE SCHWAS IN FUNCTION WORDS

Note that in normal speech, the vowels of “function words” or “grammar words” such as (i) *and*, *but*, *that*, *just*, *of*, *as*, *her*, *for*, *them*, and (ii) auxiliary verbs such as *have*, *do*, *was*, *were*, *going to* (/ˈgəʊnə/), *shall* (as well as the modal verb *can*) are usually schwas. In these cases, dictionaries usually supply both the “strong vowel” pronunciation (/ænd/ /bæt/ /ðæt/ /ðem/ etc.) and the “weak vowel” pronunciation with schwa (/ənd/ /bət/ /ðət/ /ðəm/ etc.).

For instance, in the sentence “I recognised Chris at once”, the vowel of *at* is likely to be weak, i.e., /ət wʌns/. However, if for reasons of strong emphasis the function word is stressed, then the vowel may be strong, e.g. “Clean up your room AT ONCE!”, i.e., /æt wʌns/.

Some examples of schwas, represented here by italics, in function words:

- *as* soon *as* possible; not *as* tall *as* you
- she's taller *than* me
- are you sure *that* he knows?
- Laurel *and* Hardy; Romeo *and* Juliet; War *and* Peace; fish *and* chips; Mum *and* Dad; rock *and* roll (often abbreviated in spelling to *rock 'n' roll*); bed *and* breakfast (often abbreviated to *bnb*)

- cup of tea (often abbreviated to *cuppa*: *Do you fancy a cuppa?*); pack of cards; son of a bitch
- for good; time for lunch
- it's ten to eight; sent to prison; to be or not to be; I've got to go (gotta go)
- from bad to worse; a postcard from Jill; he's from Barcelona
- naughty but nice; she was disappointed but she took it well
- if you can't beat them join them; let them go
- I was driving over the speed limit
- Can you let me know when she arrives?
- Shall I call a taxi?
- He'd have been really mad; what have you done?

Having said that, prepositions at the end of a sentence tend not to have vowel reduction:

- You don't have to. Who were you talking to?
- Where are you from?
- Who are you waiting for? Who's the present for?

SOME NOTES ON WEAK VOWELS

– *Going to*

Learners of English often consider the pronunciation of *going to* as /'gənə/ to be exclusively American, a misconception that arises because in American orthography you sometimes come across the spelling *gonna*, which in British English spelling tends to be limited to very informal contexts. However, the pronunciation /'gənə/ is freely used in most native varieties of English including RP, even on TV news programmes.

– *Overcooking the schwa*

The schwa does not exist in standard Italian, with the result that Italian speakers of English tend to “overcook” vowels, inserting a pure vowel where the schwa is required. For example, Italians of-

ten pronounce the word *England* as /'ɪŋɡlʌnd/ – with the /ʌ/ of *bus* – rather than /'ɪŋɡlənd/, *treatment* is often mistakenly pronounced /'tri:tment/ – with the /e/ of *leg* – rather than /'tri:tment/, *character* is mistakenly realised as /'kæræktə/ rather than /'kærəktə/, and the name *Michael* is habitually pronounced /'maɪkəl/ – with the /ɒ/ of *cross* – rather than /'maɪkəl/.

– *Golden rule*

In RP, stressed vowels cannot be realised as schwa. For example, in the words *foreigner*, *cinnamon* (= *cannella*), *Agatha* and *propeller* (= *elica*), there are two fixed schwas, and in *Jerusalem* there are three fixed schwas, but the stressed vowel (here in bold type) is never a schwa: /'fɒrənə/, /'sɪnəmən/, /'æɡəθə/, /prə'pelə/, /dʒə'**r**u:sələm/.

UNIT 3: WORD STRESS (2)

What follows is the second and last stress exercise. When you look for the solutions, try to identify those words which have different stress placement in Received Pronunciation and General American pronunciation. Your dictionaries will be of assistance in this respect.

Word stress exercise 2

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. unique | 2. (electrical) appliance |
| 3. recipe | 4. Canberra |
| 5. interview (<i>noun and verb</i>) | 6. canal |
| 7. Protestant | 8. Canterbury |
| 9. applicant | 10. personnel vs personal |
| 11. Romeo and Juliet | 12. Catholicism |
| 13. purchase | 14. insurance |
| 15. adult | 16. (drug, telly, e-mail) addict |
| 17. advertisement | 18. Niagara Falls |
| 19. receipt | 20. RP, UFO, SMS, BBC |
| 21. reservoir | 22. Aladdin |
| 23. Japan | 24. necessary |
| 25. subsequent | 26. comment (<i>noun and verb</i>) |
| 27. invalid (<i>adjective</i>) | 28. midday |
| 29. cerebral | 30. Arabic vs Arabian |
| 31. caregiver | 32. hotel |
| 33. infamous | 34. exam |
| 35. frustrating | 36. margarine |
| 37. a dessert vs a desert | 38. hypocrite vs hypocritical |
| 39. urinal | 40. maintenance |
| 41. manipulate | 42. tourism |
| 43. colleague | 44. accuracy |

- | | |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 45. aluminium | 46. acronym |
| 47. (to) vary | 48. Whatsapp (<i>noun and verb</i>) |
| 49. nonchalant | 50. (the) Apennines |

Notes on Word Stress Exercise 2

- some words in the exercise have differing stress placement in Received Pronunciation and in General American. What follows is a simplistic distinction, because in reality the influence of American English on British English is so great that both the stress placements provided may be frequent in RP and in regional British accents:

RP	American
<i><u>a</u>dult</i>	<i>ad<u>u</u>lt</i>
<i>ad<u>v</u>ertisement</i>	<i>ad<u>ve</u>rtisement</i>
<i><u>c</u>erebral</i>	<i>ce<u>r</u>ebra<u>l</u></i>
<i>fr<u>u</u>strating</i>	<i>fr<u>u</u>strating</i>
<i>ma<u>r</u>garine</i>	<i>ma<u>r</u>garine</i>
<i>u<u>r</u>inal</i>	<i>u<u>r</u>inal</i>
<i>alu<u>m</u>inium</i>	<i>alu<u>m</u>inum</i>
<i>no<u>n</u>chalant</i>	<i>no<u>n</u>chalant</i>

- both *Juliet* (n. 11) and *Whatsapp* (n. 48) are stressed on either the first or last syllable in both RP and in General American
- *maintenance*: in this word the stress falls on the first syllable, whereas the verb *maintain* has the stress on the second syllable. See the note on *ignorance* in Stress Exercise 1
- acronyms (*UFO*, *SMS*, *BBC*, *RP*) are as a rule stressed on the final letter
- note that in *midday* (n. 28) the stress falls on the second syllable, unlike *Monday*, *Tuesday*, *Wednesday* etc., where the stress falls on the first syllable.

UNIT 4: RHOTIC AND NON-RHOTIC ACCENTS (1)

RP is a non-rhotic accent. Your understanding of English pronunciation will improve greatly if you learn to distinguish between rhotic and non-rhotic accents of English:

- A rhotic accent is one in which the letter “r” always corresponds to the pronunciation /r/, for example General American
- A non-rhotic accent is one in which the sound /r/ is pronounced only when a phonetic vowel immediately follows, for example RP

What is a phonetic vowel? Phonetic vowels are those which are effectively produced in speech: *get*, *sing*, *potato*. They are to be distinguished from vowels which are silent, or rather, which are not produced in speech notwithstanding the presence of an orthographic vowel or vowels: *made*, *meme*, *leisure*, *watched*, *smoked*, *giraffe*, *village*, *colleague*, *tongue*, *unique*, *guaranteee*, *build*, *circuiti*: these vowels are orthographic but not phonetic.

Therefore, in a non-rhotic accent, the /r/ is pronounced immediately before a phonetic vowel, for instance *rely*, *roll*, *serious* and *ferry*, but there is no /r/:

- before a consonant (*born*, *heart*, *internal*)
- at the end of a word (*door*, *doctor*, *guitar*)
- before a silent vowel (*careful*, *nature*, *atmosphere*).

There are a few exceptions. For instance, in *litre*, *centre*, *centimetre*, *ogre* and *iron* there is no /r/ in non-rhotic accents, despite the following phonetic vowel, in this case schwa. In RP *litre* corresponds to /'li:tə/ and *iron* to /'aɪən/.

The main rhotic accents of English are General American, Canadian, Irish, Scottish, the south-west of England (for example the counties of Cornwall, Dorset and Devon).

APPENDIX

THE SYMBOLS OF RP

Vowels

Monophthongs

/ə/	<u>a</u> lert, stat <u>i</u> on
/ɪ/	ch <u>i</u> n
/i:/	dr <u>e</u> am
/ʊ/	bo <u>o</u> k
/u:/	mo <u>o</u> n
/e/	se <u>t</u>
/ɔ:/	saw
/ɜ:/	wo <u>r</u> k
/ɑ:/	ma <u>s</u> k
/æ/	s <u>a</u> d
/ɒ/	lo <u>s</u> t
/ʌ/	fu <u>n</u>

Diphthongs

/aɪ/	bri <u>gh</u> t
/eɪ/	wa <u>y</u>
/aʊ/	ou <u>t</u>
/əʊ/	co <u>a</u> t
/eə/	ha <u>i</u> r
/ɪə/	ne <u>a</u> r
/ɔɪ/	to <u>y</u>
/ʊə/	pu <u>r</u> e

Consonants

/θ/	th <u>u</u> nk
/ð/	th <u>i</u> s
/s/	so <u>c</u> k

/z/	zoo, rise
/ʃ/	shoot
/ʒ/	leisure
/ŋ/	sing
/h/	hit
/r/	right
/w/	winner
/j/	yes
/p/	pen
/b/	bat
/t/	type
/d/	dry
/tʃ/	child
/dʒ/	Japan
/k/	car
/g/	green
/f/	four
/v/	very
/m/	mind
/n/	night
/l/	late